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ABSTRACT

University students with learning disabilities (LDs) have faced a wide range of barriers which have often eroded their self-confidence and complicated their career planning process. The fact that many of these students can succeed in the university and the world of work would suggest that university LD students have a "nonsubmersible" quality that allows them to surface regardless of the obstacles thrown their way. They represent an intelligent group of very talented, creative, and hard-working human resources. Many of these students have the potential to make significant contributions to society due to their unique problem solving strategies and their willingness to persevere against numerous odds. The Learning Disabilities Program (LDP) is only one model for providing assistance to LD university students. The model has the advantage of offering a developmental, holistic approach which not only facilitates the students' career planning, but also has the potential to facilitate the personal, social, and academic development of the students. Career counselors do not have to be working within a LDP model to become effective with LD students. Many of the strategies and interventions discussed can be applied in a variety of career counseling environments. With the proper assistance, many students with fVs should be able to demonstrate their ability to succeed in school and in work. (ABL)

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Career Development Potential

of University Students with Learning Disabilities

Paper presented at the 14th Annual Meeting of the National Consultation on Vocational Counselling, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, January 26-28, 1988.

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What is the potential of Individual With Learning Disabilities?

Unemployed, underemployed, or a criminal...
Does this have to be the fate of our learning disabled youth?
The answer is an affirmative NO!

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Confusion over the potential of people with learning disabilities (LD's) is common. There is an incredible wealth of creativity, talent, and perseverance among those with LD's. With the right modifications in academic and employment settings, many individuals with LD's can not only succeed, but moreover they can make a significant contribution to society.

Many famous individuals have been suggested as having LD's. Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Edison, Virginia Wolf, Winston Churchill, and Woodrow Wilson are just a few of the success stories. It is not fair to expect that all those with LD's are going to become famous or even that they desire such status. On the other hand, it is tragic that the more typical fate for so many talented LD individuals has been unemployment, underemployment, and criminal involvement. It is scandalous that the lives of too many capable LD youths have been filled with low self-esteem, despair, embitterment, and disillusionment.

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This paper will outline career planning and employment barriers that plague many students with learning disabilities. York University's Learning Disabilities Programme (LDP) is one model that is available to meet the career planning needs of university LD students. The LDP model will be discussed and recent research findings of the programme will be presented. Suggested interventions to facilitate the career success of those with LD's will be provided.

What is a learning disability?

What does it mean to be a university student with LD's? Usually the LD student has average to above average intelligence, but receives, integrates, or expresses information differently from most non-disabled individuals. University students with LD's can experience a wide range of difficulties in: concentrating, listening, perceiving, thinking, talking, reading, writing, calculating, and spelling. Associated features often include difficulties with: organization, time management, problem solving, and social interaction.

Career Problems: Case Examples

The talents of this population are often ignored or misunderstood. The cases below help to illustrate some of the career difficulties which have been encountered by individuals with LD's. The names used in the cases are fictitious.

John was misdiagnosed in elementary school as being mentally retarded rather than learning disabled and then funnelled into the school's "opportunity" class into which all of the children with behavioural problems were streamed. He reported that in this class, he was told by his teacher that he would grow up to be either on welfare or else he would become a criminal like the rest of his classmates. Twenty years later John was in university achieving "A's" in many of his courses. When he graduated, he was employed as a counsellor, working

with people who hadn't been as fortunate as himself. He could relate well to his clients who had entered a life of crime after many years of academic failure and frustration. He still had difficulty, however, dealing with the emotional scars of his own misdiagnosis. He had a hard time forgetting his teacher's prophecy about his future career success.

Mathew was told by his vocational rehabilitation counsellor who had just read a work assessment in his file that he would probably never be able to find work, nor succeed even if he did. Because of these negative conclusions, the counsellor refused to support Mathew's request for funding of a computer system to help him compensate for his severe reading and writing disabilities. Without the computer aid, Mathew was forced to work three times harder than his peers who didn't have LD's. Despite this handicap and despite his counsellor's discouraging predictions, Mathew was able to succeed both in school and at work. At school, many "A's" and 'A+'s" were obtained. At work, his employers referred to him as "a sensitive, creative, and insightful individual who worked far beyond normal job expectations and was a definite asset to the programme." Unfortunately, despite these real successes, Mathew experienced frustration, disillusionment, and despair due to his experiences with a rehabilitation system that he considered was hindering rather than facilitating his development.

Melissa reported that she was considered mentally retarded when she went to apply for jobs through her local employment centre and thus she was directed to jobs using very low level, repetitive manual skills. When she failed to perform well at these manual jobs, she was told that there was very little that could be done to help her find work because she seemed incapable of performing even the most basic jobs. Melissa, who's LD fell into the area of visual-spatial processing and fine and gross motor functioning, had been directed to

jobs that were directly confronting her major areas of weakness. Her superior verbal skills were overlooked because of her repeatedly poor performance in manual jobs. Melissa did a great stand up comedy routine describing her many employment mishaps. Unfortunately for Melissa, beneath the surface comedy was tremendous pain and a shattered self-image. Unfortunately for society, this misdirection was resulting in a great loss of human potential.

The above cases typify the problems that complicate and often hinder the career development of individuals with invisible handicaps. Too many LD individuals are written off as lazy, unmotivated, or stupid. Too many are misguided by well meaning career advisors. Too many are placed in inappropriate work settings which directly confront their weaknesses, rather than build upon their strengths.

What are the career barriers?

Barriers to career success confront individuals with LD's at almost every turn in their career development journey. Super (1951) defined the career counselling process as "helping a person to develop and accept an integrated and adequate picture of himself and of his role in the world of work, and to test this concept against reality, with satisfaction to himself and to society" (In Biller, 1982, p. 2). With the many mixed messages that LD individuals receive, it is easy to see how many people with LD's would experience confusion and thus encounter more difficulties with the career planning process.

The career development process is often described as being divided into five distinct phases: 1) assessment of self, 2) obtaining accurate world of work information, 3) making career decisions, 4) job seeking behaviours, and 5) on the job success. Maneuvering through these five stages of career development can be difficult for many people. For those with LD's, however, the path is strewn with many more roadblocks.

Barriers in the "Self-Assessment Phase" of Career Planning

Career planning is often described as the "implementation of one's self-concept" (Tolbert, 1980). Students who have good eyesight, but who cannot read, who have good hearing, but who cannot follow a sequence of oral instructions, who have articulate oral expressive skills, but who cannot write, and who are bright, but who experience repeated academic failures often encounter great confusion about what where their strengths really lie. For many individuals with LD's, their self-concept is a fragile entity filled with many mixed messages about their skills and their potential. Feelings of depression, incompetency, and lack of control often cloud the LD person's ability to conduct an accurate self-assessment.

Formal vocational testing often does not provide an accurate picture of the true strengths and weaknesses of this population. If many of the York University LD students had taken seriously the advice that they were given on the basis of their psychometric career assessments, they would have never attended university and therefore never would have experienced their academic success.

Being in university does not free LD students of negative influences which are destructive to their self-esteem. Individuals participating in York's Learning Disabilities Programme (LDP) often report that they have been told by fellow students, tutorial leaders, vocational counsellors, parents, or professors that they do not belong in the university environment. One professor argued that just as society does not encourage blind people to fly planes, we should not encourage those with LD's to become university students. One student with a reading disability reported that when he asked for some help reading the microfiche in the library, he was told, "What are you doing in university if you can't even read the microfiche?"

It was fortunate that he did not drop out of school because he ended up winning an award for the most promising Fine Arts undergraduate student at York University.

Research which was recently conducted by York's LDP confirmed the difficulties in self-concept that are prevalent amongst those with LD's. A group of 34 York university students with LD's were compared to 31 York university students without LD's on a wide range of characteristics. The students were matched by sex, age, and year of study. The study revealed that the LD students were indeed having more problems with self-esteem, career maturity, academic adjustment to university, and personal-social adjustment than were the group of Non-LD students.

Barriers to Obtaining Accurate Information About the World of Work

Acquiring reliable data about job and school requirements can be difficult for many career planners. However, it can be even more complex for those with LD's. Printed career information is often cumbersome if not impossible to process for those LD students with severe reading disabilities. Details passed along through word of mouth can often be misleading, particularly for an LD individual with auditory reception difficulties or memory problems.

The messages that individuals with LD's receive about the reality of the world of work and school are often discouraging. They may be told that if they can't read, they are never going to be able to get through university or do well in a professionally oriented job. While it may be true that a LD student may find it more difficult to compete in university and in professional careers, it is not true that all LD students will never make it. With the help of textbooks on tape, talking computers, and new approaches to remediating or compensating, even those LD students who may experience some severe learning difficulties may be able to

succeed. There are numerous case histories of students with LD's graduating from university and entering the ranks of the professionally employed.

Many teachers, counsellors, and career planners are uninformed about the range of academic modifications which may aid those with LD's. For instance, they may be unaware of many of the exam modifications which are possible for some LD students. They may be unaware that in some postsecondary programmes, there may be special admission procedures available for some LD students. Many advisors are unaware that even on specialized standardized tests, such as the GRE, GMAT, and LSAT, students with documented LD's are being allowed reasonable accommodations for their LD's. Gaps in this type of information can lead to some extremely poor career planning decisions.

Workers and employers are only now beginning to discover the many ways in which the new technology can aid those with disabilities perform their job more effectively. We now have machines that can read out loud almost any type of printed material. Word processing systems are now becoming more sophisticated at helping users identify errors in spelling, grammar, and even style. Many students with LD's have been able to compensate for a great many of their difficulties by using a wide range of strategies. It is most unfortunate that information about the variety of possible job modifications is not widely utilized by a large number of teachers, career counsellors, career planners, and employers.

Barriers to Career Decision Making

Based on the above mentioned difficulties, it should come as no surprise that career decision making can be more difficult for those with LD's. Career counsellors may be asked, "What career goals are realistic for individuals with LD's?" Making global assumptions about the suitability of a specific career goal for all LD individuals is impossible. The list

of realistic goals is about as long as it would be for those without LD's. *Profile*, a 1987 publication put out by the Handicapped Employment Programme in the Ontario Government's Ministry of Labour, outlines the impressive career achievements of 34 people with a variety of disabilities. Career goals need to be individualized based on the skills, interests, and values of each different career planner.

Perhaps the greated obstacle to career decision-making for those with LD's has to be the emotional blocks discussed earlier. Loss of self-esteem, negative attitudes towards learning, fear of failure, fear of success, frustration, depression, and feelings of being out of control are among a few of the emotional factors that can significantly interfere in effective decision-making, risk-taking, and action taking of those with LD's.

Obstacles to Job Search Success

There are often many extra hurdles that students with LD's need to jump over in order to achieve job search success. If there is a deficit in writing skills, developing effective cover letters, resumes and application packages may be more difficult. A reading deficit may interfere with the student's ability to accurately understand job advertisements and job descriptions. A spatial disorientation problem may prevent the job applicant from being able to find the interview location on time.

There are numerous obstacles in our employment system which impede the success of those with LD's. Placement and personnel offices are both sources for potential difficulties. Reading the job boards can be difficult for someone with a reading disability. If the office is noisy, hearing the receptionist can present problems for someone who is easily distracted by auditory stimulation. Filling in employment forms can present difficulty for individuals with a wide range of LD's. One student with a reading disability reported going into a

placement office to look for a job. When he asked for some assistance reading the professional job advertisements, he was told, "If you can't read the advertisement, you obviously can't do the job." Another student with spelling difficulties reported being asked to fill in an application form in front of company representatives. When they observed his extensive use of a dictionary to fill in the form, he was informed that they would no longer be needing his services.

Another problem that some LD students face is not having enough of the "right information" to put on their resumes. Commitments to tutoring, summer courses, and extra hours for studying and remediation may prevent many of these students from having the time to take on part-time and summer jobs or appropriate extra-curricular activities. These extra hours of hard work often go unnoticed. The lack of extra-curricular involvement may be interpreted by an employer as a lack of enthusiasm, initiative, or involvement. The employer may be evaluating the resume of the hardest working, most committed and loyal employee that they will ever find, but they will often not be able to assess this in the traditional ways by examining the student's resume. It is often hard for the LD student to know what to do with this lack of content on their resume. If they reveal their LD's, or their involvements in tutoring, they run the risk of being considered stupid by some employers. Proving this kind of discrimination is not an easy task.

It is important to note here that not all LD students have voids in their extracurricular commitments. For example, in the LDP, there have been members of the varsity football and skiing teams, a president a Youth Political Group on campus, and several students who are actively involved in theatre productions. On the other hand, it should be emphasized

that maintaining these commitments, with the extra time demands often imposed due to their LD's, can often be a very difficult time and stress management task.

Difficulties with nonverbal communication can also be a significant barrier to job search success for many individuals with LD's. Often the same deficit that causes the person to experience problems reading the printed word, causes difficulty for the person in reading the nonverbal cues in their environment. It has been said that job interviewers often make their employment decisions in the first three minutes of the interview. This decision is frequently primarily based on nonverbal cues. Employers have reported feeling more uncomfortable with the nonverbal communication of those with LD's. A limp handshake, inappropriate eye contact, an awkward gait, or unusually paced verbal output can all contribute to a perfectly capable job candidate being turned down. Although not all LD individuals experience these nonverbal problems, for those that do, these types of social skills deficits can be almost insurmountable barriers.

Despite all of these job search obstacles, it would appear that LD university students can be successful at obtaining employment. Specifically, York's LDP examined employment success of LD students in the summer of 1987. Of the 18 LD students who were randomly surveyed, it was discovered that all of those students who wanted summer work had managed to locate jobs. Underemployment rather than unemployment seemed to be the more common fate of the LD students who were surveyed.

The summer employment picture for the group of LD students surveyed really didn't look very different from what one would expect for university students without LD's. Some students obtained career oriented jobs such as programme coordinator, recreational leader, residential counsellor, aeroengine technician, and daycare worker. However, most of the

students were engaged in nonprofessional level work such as manual labour, caretaking, and waitressing. In other words, underemployment was common. In discussions with the LD students surveyed, it became apparent that some of these students were deliberately avoiding career oriented jobs that might allow their LD's to be uncovered. Many students, however, had attempted to obtain more career oriented work, but were unsuccessful due to the many job search barriers which were described above.

Barriers to "On the Job" Success

The barriers to "on the job success" can also be numerous. Many of the university LD students who were surveyed reported that they experienced some difficulties on the job that were a direct result of their LD. Some of these students reported adopting job modifications such as: writing down instructions, using a dictaphone, or using a word processing system to help them compensate for their difficulties. Unfortunately, both workers and employers may be unaware of other simple job modifications or accommodations that may enable LD workers to demonstrate their potential. Therefore, needless problems may occur on the job which may be able to be fairly easily prevented. *Design for Success*, a new publication put out by the Handicapped Employment Programme in Ontario's Ministry of Labour helps to outline many important accommodations, modifications, and strategies which can be used on the job.

Just as in school, simple errors made on the job may be misunderstood as stupidity, carelessness, laziness, or lack of motivation. Promotions may be denied based on misperceptions of what that simple spelling error or that messy handwriting really meant. The LD worker may again have their self-esteem battered due to the misunderstanding of those around them. For example, one articulate, brilliant young man with a severe reading and

writing disability was asked by his secretary, "How do you expect to help others if you can't even help yourself?" This question came in response to his request to spell a fairly common word.

It might be easy to say that individuals with LD's would be better off disclosing their disability to placement officers and to employers if they wanted to be better understood. Unfortunately, such disclosure often backfires. One York student who was achieving the highest performance ratings in his company was selected to represent the company on a promotional training tour. Subsequently, in reference to an unrelated issue, this student revealed he had a reading disability. Although this disability in no way affected his ability to do well in his current job or in the new position, this student discovered that after his disclosure the promotion was revoked. He had no direct way to prove that it was due to his disclosure. Even if he could prove discrimination he was reluctant to put in the energy that it would take to pursue the matter further.

The difficulties that many individuals with LD's experience with social skills can also interfere with the establishment of "that old boy (or old girl) network." Not being able to "fit in" is often a problem that can minimize the worker's ability to advance on the job.

Not understanding nonverbal components of communication can lead to many confusing interactions. For example, if a worker fails to detect the sarcastic tone with which the supervisor says, "You really did a great job with that one!" then the worker may not realize an improvement in performance is necessary.

Is "on the job" success possible?

In the summer of 1987, York's LDP undertook an applied research project designed to look at how to actualize the potential of learning disabled adults on the job. An employer liaison committee was struck to explore this question further. Bell Canada, IBM, the Ontario government, the City of North York, and Harry Rosen Inc. all sent representatives to this committee to discuss the issues.

One of the central questions of concern was what modifications, if any, were needed on the job for LD students to demonstrate their potential on the job. A case history approach was selected as the methodology for exploring the issues. It was decided that the committee would try to find jobs for several LD students. All hiring employers were given information about what the term LD's meant as well as more detailed information on the specific nature of the LD of the student that they had hired. All of the employers were invited to call the LDP to consult about any issues which might be related to helping their employee.

The initial findings of this pilot project seem to be demonstrating that those with LD's can be very successful on the job, despite the many obstacles that they face. All of the students who worked through the project received highly favourable performance evaluations. Employers were asked to rank the LD student's performance in relationship to other summer students that they had supervised. A wide range of employee characteristics were ranked including overall job performance, job attitude, enthusiasm, initiative, punctuality, attendance, ability to learn the job quickly, creativity, ability to accept criticism and compliments, and the ability to get along with others on the job. All of the participating students received above average ratings in their performance appraisals. In fact, one student was ranked as superior in almost all of the categories appraised. Comments by the employers about the

students included phrases such as, "good worker," "an achiever," "done an excellent job,", "good public image," "enthusiastic," and "all around the best student hired this summer."

The job modifications that were needed by students participating in this employment project were few. In fact, only one student needed any job modifications. This individual needed instructions and guidelines to be written down at certain critical points in his project's development. Despite this, his work performance was still ranked as above average in most of the categories appraised.

This pilot project has begun to demonstrate that "on the job" success can be attainable when those with LD's are understood and given a chance to demonstrate their potential. There were only four students who participated in this project, however. Therefore, many more cases need to be examined before any formal conclusions can be drawn. The next phase of this research will attempt to explore how LD students can perform in their first full-time job after graduation.

How Do We Help Individuals With Learning Disabilities?

York's Learning Disabilities Programme (LDP) Model

Due to the complexity of emotional, social, academic, and career problems that individuals with LD's face, Dr. Harold Minden, the architect of the York University model, decided that any university programme which was going to adequately address the needs of this population would ideally need to have a holistic approach. With financial aid from the Counselling Foundation of Canada (CFC), the LDP was established in September 1985 in York University's Counselling and Development Centre to assist university students with LD's actualize their true potential. Originally a three year pilot program, the project was provided with an additional three years of funding.

Originally, five staff were hired to implement the model. A psychologist was hired to coordinate the programme and deliver psychological support to the students. A career specialist was hired to deal with career planning and employment needs. A life skill specialist was recruited to help the students with issues such as time and stress management, assertiveness, and developing improved social skills. An educational therapist was employed to address the academic issues. A programme assistant was hired to assist with support needs. In addition, a variety of interns, tutors, and volunteers were enlisted to assist with programme implementation. As the programme developed, it became apparent that a full-time psychoeducational diagnostician would also be needed to deal with the increasing demands for LD assessments.

Career counselling needs are met in a variety of ways. Individualized career counselling provides the specialized help that many of these students need to sort through the many mixed messages that they have received. Group career planning and job search programmes are available for skill building activities. The credit course that the LDP centre teaches on learning disabilities includes a career component that allows the students to explore theoretically the many career issues which confront LD individuals. The employment liaison committee offers the student an opportunity to learn more about the career areas of their interest by offering LD students work opportunities designed to explore how to actualize their true potential.

The holistic approach of the centre seems crucial for facilitating the effective career development of the students. Through the programme, help can be provided to deal with a wide range of the career obstacles previously discussed. Programmes are available to improve confidence, alleviate emotional blocks, remediate skill deficits, identify compensatory

academic strategies, and build social skills. These programmes are an important supplement to the specific career counselling and job search services which are available.

In this model of providing service to university students with LD's, career planning is treated as a developmental, life planning issue and not just as a narrowly defined decision about a work goal which is made at only one point in the students' career planning. The career counselling process can mature with the students. As the students develop confidence, better academic adjustment, and increased work experience, the career counsellor can help the students to realistically reassess alternative career goals.

In this system, the career professional is a counsellor as well as an advocate. If the student requires a certain academic or work accommodation to be made, the career specialist can be proactive in helping that accommodation materialize. If the student would like an advocate to open the door to jobs, the career specialist is available to assist. The career specialist can also work cooperatively with government rehabilitation workers to ensure that all parties involved are having their needs met.

What can career counsellors do to help those with LD's?

A career counsellor must treat each student as a unique individual, yet be sensitive to the underlying pain, frustration, and confusion that often is hidden in this population. Understanding some of the obstacles that this group faces can help the counsellor develop the empathy necessary to provide the necessary support services.

A variety of new strategies may need to be developed and employed to help this population overcome some of their self-defeating behaviours. Utilizing techniques to help many LD individuals improve their social skills, nonverbal communication skills, and their time and stress mangement skills seems particularly important.

It seems essential to consider a variety of possible career goals. Creative brainstorming may need to take place to uncover modifications or accommodations that may be possible to allow individuals to reach their goals.

There must be recognition that improving self-esteem for this group is one of the most important accomplishments to take place if career and life goals are to be reached. Therefore, encouraging the student in directions that will improve self-esteem is critical.

Referral sources need to be identified where individuals with LD's can obtain the psychological, emotional, social, or academic support that they need. This holistic approach may not be possible from within one programme, but a network of possible referral options may be developed. Local branches of the Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) may be able to provide a list of possible referral sources.

Being willing to act as an advocate for some of these students in both educational and employment settings may prove to be very important. While many LD individuals do not need or want this kind of assistance, for others, direct advocacy can mean the difference between success and failure.

Remember that entrepreneurism is the trend of the 1980's. Not all LD individuals are going to fit into large company systems. If their organizational skills are intact and they are self-motivated, hard working, and enthusiastic, perhaps an entrepreneurial direction will allow them the freedom to demonstrate their true potential.

Conclusion

University students with LD's have faced a wide range of barriers which have often eroded their self confidence and complicated their career planning process. The fact that many of these students can succeed in university and in the world of work would suggest, however, that university LD students have a "nonsubmersible" quality that allows them to surface regardless of the obstacles thrown their way. They represent an intelligent group of very talented, creative, and hard working human resources. Many of these students have the potential to make significant contributions to society due to their unique problem solving strategies and their willingness to persevere against numerous odds.

The LDP is only one model for providing assistance to LD university students. The model offers the advantage of offering a developmental, holistic approach which not only facilitates the students' career planning, but also has the potential to facilitate the personal, social, and academic development of the students. Career counsellors, however, do not have to be working within a LDP model to become more effective with LD students. Many of the strategies and interventions discussed can be applied in a variety of career counselling environments.

With the proper assistance, many students with LD's should be able to demonstrate their ability to succeed in school and in work. It is tragic that too frequently, LD youngsters end up as statistics in studies of school dropouts, juvenile delinquents, unemployed, and underemployed. It is critical that we find better ways of minimizing the early failures that too many LD youngsters experience. We need to learn to focus on the strengths in this special population, rather than on the weaknesses. Unutilized talents represent a gross injustice and

a great loss not only to the individuals involved, but to our society as a whole. We need to work together to help improve the chances for success of all individuals with LD's.

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